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The Luxury Trains of the MOB

The Montreux Oberland Bernois Railway, running from Montreux to Zweisimmen and Lenk is well known for its innovative luxury trains.

Recent visits have allowed P.J.Bowen to sample their delights.

My first luxury journey on the MOB formed part of a conference on regional aircraft financing. Although the conference itself was held in Montreux, the conference dinner was to be in Gstaad, the journey between the two being accomplished in the *Belle Epoque* saloons, survivors of the 1930s *Golden Mountain Pullman Express*. Currently, two vehicles are in use, Ars 101, which includes a bar and the sumptuous bay-window saloon As 102. For our trip these were hauled by GDe4/4 No.6004 *Interlaken*. Travelling on these vehicles is a superb experience, particularly when accompanied by MOB's own-label white wine.

On arrival at Gstaad the party adjourned to a nearby hotel for a meal, accompanied by a viewing of live World Cup action (remember that?). The more prudent were less concerned with who won than in deciding which coach to travel in on the return, my vote going for the comfort of As 102.

It is surprising how much use these vehicles see and in the following week they were in service virtually every day. Indeed, they are so popular that a third *Nostalgiewagen* was added to the fleet last year, rebuilt at Chernex works from open balcony car AB 93, dating from 1926. Another historic MOB coach can be found on the Blonay Chamby line, where I was able to experience the spartan delights of steam haulage in C4 45, dating from 1902. There is quite a contrast between its slatted seats and the sumptuous upholstery of the saloons.

Better known are the two *Panoramic Expresses*. More correctly, there are three trains, comprising one *Superpanoramic* set and a pair of *Panoramic* sets. The *Superpanoramic* is a first class only train running at weekends; at other times the stock is used for the *Supertrain du Chocolat* to Broc on Summer Wednesdays, as well as being available for private charter. For

my journey the set consisted of a pair of driving trailers and a first worked by a pair of BDe4/4 railcars (3005/6) in the centre of the train. The railcars feature a "rustic" interior which is something of an acquired taste; however the *Superpanoramics* themselves cannot be faulted. My early arrival at Montreux gave that most cherished of treats, a front seat. This must surely be the best way to see the line and its train workings. A single window gives an uninterrupted view and a button is thoughtfully provided to operate the windscreen wipers. Aircraft-type seatbelts are provided for safety in the event of an emergency stop; fortunately they were not called into use on my journey.

Arrival at Zweisimmen brought my first sight of a DZe6/6, originally built for the short-lived *Golden Mountain Express* of 1931 No.2002 was busy shunting a *Panoramic Express* set, its sister locomotive 2001 was at the time undergoing overhaul.

Unlike its *Superpanoramic* counterpart, the *Panoramic Express* operates daily. There are now two trains, one based at Montreux and one at Zweisimmen. During my visits these were usually worked by the GDe4/4 locomotives, which in typical Swiss fashion are rated as powered baggage cars. Most of my trips were behind 6004, *Interlaken*, although did catch up with the record breaking 6003 *Saanen*, which reached 110 km/h in November 1983 on tests between Zweisimmen and Lenk, a metre gauge record.

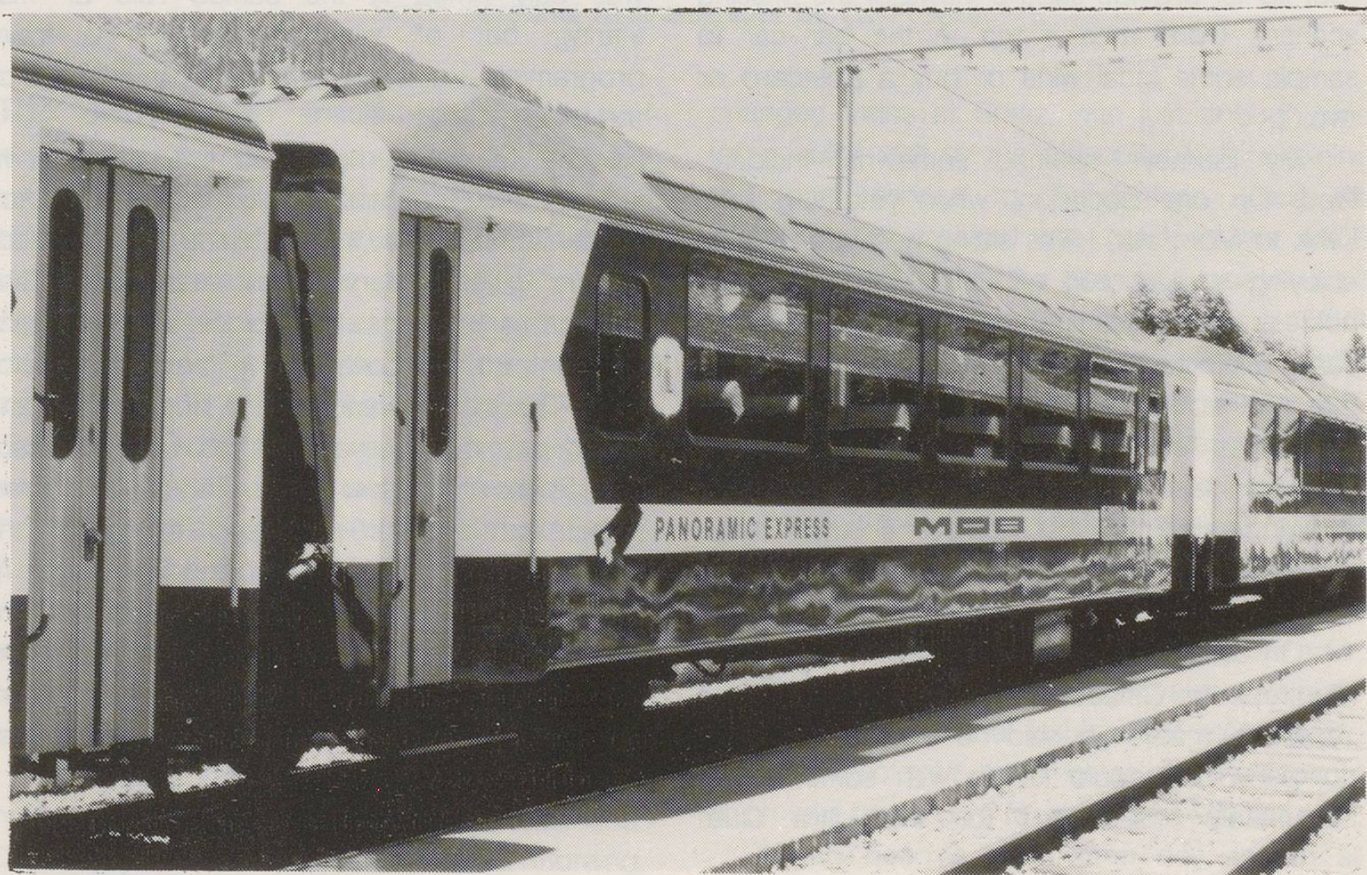
The *Panoramic* sets generally consist of five coaches, two second class, one bar/second and two first class coaches. On my first trip, which was hauled by the ever present 6004 *Interlaken*, the train included As 111, which carries the British Royal Coat of Arms, celebrating the journey by Queen Elizabeth II in 1980.



Above: *Superpanoramica Express* at Montreux, with railcars 3006 and 3006 in the centre

Below: Railcar 3003 on the *Panoramica Express* at Lenk

Photos P.J.Bowen





DZe 6/6 No.2002 shunts a *Panoramic Express* coach at Zweisimmen *Photo P.J.Bowen*

The coaches, with their broad windows and roof lights, provide superb views of the passing scenery. Don't miss a trip to the bar car to sample some local wine or buy a postcard or two.

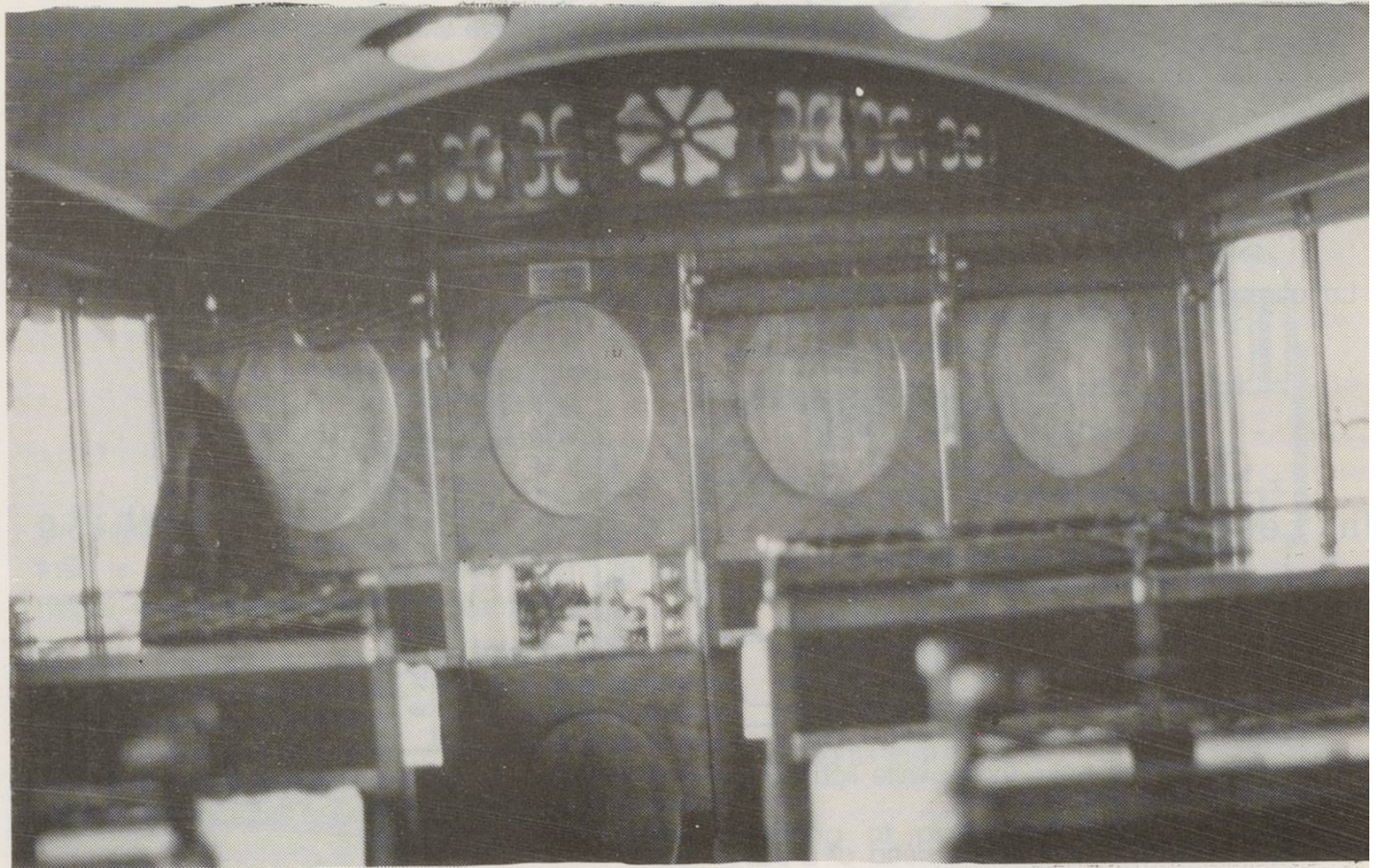
My journeys seemed somewhat incident-filled. On one occasion, when returning from Lenk to Montreux, I was sitting near the counter enjoying a quiet cup of coffee whilst the train hostess was assembling a tray of drinks to serve. Unfortunately the train lurched and both tray and bottle went flying. I rushed behind the counter to fetch a cloth and promptly cleaned up the mess to the surprise of my fellow passengers. A grateful hostess ensured that I was well supplied with coffee for the rest of the trip!

On another *Panoramic Express* journey from Montreux to Gstaad, I was approached by a Japanese man who said he worked for a TV company and could I help with some filming. Fortunately this wasn't for the Ultra Quiz!

Instead, after yet another free cup of coffee, I was duly filmed in the cameo role of "man staring out of window" for a TV travel programme. Journeys are certainly eventful on the MOB!

The railway is not content to rest on its laurels and continues to innovate. A new *Piniarina Panoramic* train, costing SFr.12 million is due to enter service this year. The all first class train will consist of six vehicles, including the central power car, and will have two saloon bars. The train will be capable of 100 km/h and would permit a journey time between Montreux and Spiez of just two hours. This is, of course, dependent on the proposed mixing of the gauge between Zweisimmen and Spiez and its extension to Interlaken Ost to link up with the Brunig line of the SBB. This opens up the prospect of a through train over the entire *Golden Pass* route from Montreux to Luzern.

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Interior of As 102 taken in May 1979 Photo C.J.Freezer

glorious weather from the upper deck of a Lake Brienz boat. But at Zweisimmen the rest of the party had a pleasant surprise for instead of one Pullman, we had two - this for a thirty strong group. The MOB's generosity was due to the fact that, by changing our itinerary, we had allowed them to return the set from an earlier trip in time for a further working that evening - these coaches are very much in demand.

With not only a cheerful hostess to serve drinks, but a knowledgeable guide as well (also making a return journey), we had a marvellous time. It was quickly agreed that the photographers would use 102, with all windows lowered, whilst the rest of the party enjoyed the comforts of the *Belle Epoque* car. As the *chef*, I commandeered a seat in each car on the specious excuse that I needed to supervise both sections of the party. Speaking for myself, I don't think there is anything to choose as regards intrinsic comfort between the two cars, but I imagine that the *Belle Epoque* might get a little noisy if the group were less than well behaved.

It is worth adding that after an ignominious period of service as a kiddies coach, A 101 is now beautifully refurbished, provided with fixed, swivelling bucket seats and labelled for the *Golden Pass* service. First class travellers are advised to join the train as early as possible in order to get the best seats, remembering that, thanks to the reversal at Meiringen, at Luzern or Interlaken, the right hand side of the train has the best views.

Luxury Trains of the MOB

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What a journey to look forward to. In the meantime, I shall be returning to sample the delights of the MOB in the snow and to see what further adventures await me aboard the *Panoramic Express*, doubtless hauled by the faithful 6004 *Interlaken* (A model of which has now supplanted RhB stock on my model railway - but don't tell Dave Howsam & Co.!).